

Swamp Campaign Victory, Alexievich in the Palace of Republic, Who Hates Whom – Civil Society Digest

Fastest crowdfunding campaign ever has collected money for an athlete and rock band singer Vital Hurkoŭ. Online registration on the 6th International Congress of Belarusian Studies is now open.

Svetlana Alexievich held its first public presentation in the very heart of Minsk – the Palace of Republic. A public campaign In Defense of Belarusian Swamps achieved the adoption of the Strategy of conservation and sustainable use of peatlands.

IDEAby published a grid based on relations between Belarusian political parties and movements' leadership. This and more in the new edition of Civil Society Digest.

Crowdfunding

[Fastest crowdfunding campaign has collected money for an athlete.](#) For 7 hours a crowdfunding platform Talakosht collected Br68.2 mils (\$3,4K) for Vital Hurkoŭ to participate in the Muaythai World Championship in Sweden. Vital Hurkoŭ is a world champion and vocalist of BRUTTO band banned for performances in Belarus. After his dismissal from the Ministry of Vital Hurkoŭ looked for money via crowdfunding; his campaign was supported by 170 people, who donated from \$2,5 to \$250.

[Talaka.by celebrates one year of its crowdfunding activity.](#)

During the year, 19 out of 48 crowdfunding campaigns hosted at Talakosht (Talaka.by crowdfunding resource), finished successfully. More than 200 people consistently support the new campaigns at the platform. The total amount of funds raised is around Br600 million (around \$30,000).

Education and science

[To the 10th anniversary of the Kalinoŭski programme](#), opened since 2006 for repressed Belarusian students and funded by the Polish government, Svaboda.org has collected 10 alumni success stories. [Andrej Dyńko](#), *Naša Niva* editor, [reviewed the stories](#) and revealed that 9 of the 11 best graduates remained in Poland, two of them opened the hookah. Dyńko concludes that now when there are no cases of expulsion from the Belarusian universities the program brings damage since the most talented youth move from Belarus.

[Online registration on the 6th International Congress of Belarusian Studies is open from 1 April](#). The 6th Congress will take place on October 7-9, in Kaunas, Lithuania. The Congress was initiated as an annual meeting of Belarusian and foreign scholars, experts, analysts and representatives of civil society and government institutions, which are involved in studying Belarus. Application deadline is 20 May.

Green initiatives

[Swamp campaign won: the resolution on draining marshes replaced by strategy for their conservation](#). A public campaign *In Defense of Belarusian Swamps* started three years ago at the initiative of several people and has grown to the *Bagna* eco-CSO. The campaign could cancel the Council of Ministers' Resolution on peat extraction and achieved the adoption of the Strategy of conservation and sustainable use of peatlands. The

organisers share their experience of successful implementation.

[Zrobim! action attended by over 22 thousand people](#). On April 9, the global action of cleaning illegal dumps *Let's Do It!* (*Zrobim!* in Belarusian) gathered about 22,700 volunteers from 43 cities and villages of Belarus (1,500 volunteers last year). Participants collected 560,000 litres of waste, thus removing more than 500 contaminated sites. The action was coordinated by Green Network, Centre for Environmental Solutions, Interaction Fund, Minsk Cycling Society and government ministries.

[New educational program "City: Core, Community, Image of Action"](#) is implemented by the Flying University in partnership with Green Network and Urban Tactics almanac. The course focuses on the modern approaches to the development of Belarusian cities and consists of three phases: intensive education, research and a summing-up workshop. Researchers and activists of environmental and urban movements are invited to participate. Deadline for applications is April 15.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Svetlana Alexievich's presentation took place in the Palace of Republic](#). On April 14, a presentation of the Radio Svaboda's book *Alexievich on Svaboda* took place in the very heart of Minsk – the Palace of Republic. This was the first [public presentation](#) of Svetlana Alexievich in Belarus after receiving the Nobel Prize.

[One-fifth of appeals at the Comfortable City resolved positively](#). For five months of its activity the website [Comfortable City](#) (petitions.by) posted 137 petitions, received 58 responses from government bodies, and 26 issues were

decided in favour of citizens. Two-thirds of appeals are linked to the community level. Appeals submitted via the website are legally valid and require a mandatory reaction of related officials.

[Freedom House has raised the rating of democracy in Belarus.](#)

In its annual report [Nations in Transit 2016](#) Freedom House improves the Belarus' overall rating of the level of democracy, for the first time in six years. The growth is recorded only on two of the seven parameters – electoral process and civil society.

[29 CSOs submit a group proposal for the changes in the rules of foreign aid receiving.](#)

The initiative to develop a consolidated position is initiated by Centre for Legal Transformation *Lawtrend* and the Assembly of NGOs. The program maximum is to cancel a permit procedure for receiving foreign grants and go to the notification principle, or at least to determine the minimum amount of aid, which does not require the state registration.

Other

[Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities presents an annual monitoring of citizens' appeals.](#)

The total number of requests increased by 40% comparing to 2014. Geographical distribution is almost equal 49% (Minsk) and 51% (regions). The major part of requests is still on social protection issues – 39%. Increasing the number of appeals can be linked to the signing by Belarus of the Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons, which took place in autumn 2015.

[Play "Seven" in Belarus.](#)

On April 4, in the framework of the UNFPA information campaign, the National Academic Janka Kupala Theatre hosted a play "Seven" aimed to draw public attention to the problem of domestic violence. The play is a monologue of seven women from different cultures, who have overcome

major obstacles on the path to justice, freedom, and equality. In each country, the roles are performed by famous women and men.

[IDEAby map of the opposition](#). IDEAby published a grid of opposition relations, jokingly called 'Who Hates Whom'. The grid is based on relations between Belarusian political parties and movements' leadership. It is noticeable that the relations within the opposition has changed [for the year](#).

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

People of the Swamps Fight the Flooding

This April, the region of Paliessie in southern Belarus experienced annual flood caused by major local rivers. The flood was the largest in decades.

Yet Paliessie is famous not only for floods that turn towns and villages into islands. The region's population presents a distinct ethnic group within the Belarusian nation. They speak a peculiar dialect and retain many features of traditional lifestyle.

Belarusian protestant communities are very concentrated in the region. Their way of life differs a great deal from that of their Orthodox compatriots. Previously, Paliessie was one of the Jewish centres of Eastern Europe and many famous Jews come

from here.

Because of its unique nature, culture and history, Paliessie became a popular tourist destination in Belarus.

Belarusian Venice

Belarus has no access to the sea, but once a year some Paliessie spots turn into islands surrounded by water. Geographically, Paliessie lies in the lowlands, where two major Belarusian rivers, Prypiac and Dniapro, flow. These natural conditions make Paliessie vulnerable to floods, which occur annually in spring. The 2013 flood turned out to be one of the largest in recent decade. Here is a typical picture of a flooded village:

For people who are used to a comfortable city life such floods look like a disaster. But paliašuks (this is how they call themselves) take it easy. They have gotten used to such phenomena since childhood and perceive them as the natural state of things. Every family usually has a boat to move between their yards and mainland during the flood. Children sail to school and their parents to work. When water comes too close or even inside the houses, people construct devices to raise their house and even animals in sheds.

However, even these sophisticated means of adaptation do not help, if the situation becomes too extreme. For that reason the Belarusian emergency service is especially busy during the flood period. They move people and animals, build dikes, distribute food and other products when people are unable to reach mainland and do other kinds of emergency work.

People of the Swamps

Ethnically and linguistically, Paliessie presents a peculiar case. Some scholars consider Paliašuks a separate ethnic group within the rather homogenous Belarusian nation. This group has

formed and preserved their distinctiveness very much due to natural conditions which isolated them from the rest of population.

Linguists believe Paliessie dialect to be a transitional dialect between Belarusian and Ukrainian language, as it contains elements of them both. In the beginning of 1990s, a separatist movement emerged which sought to create a Paliessie language. However, the movement did not become popular among locals and soon declined.

✘ Paliessie has always been a treasure house for ethnographers and linguists, as it preserved many ancient features in the way of life, culture and language. However, Paliašuks has never held a strong common identity. They have acknowledged their distinctiveness but call themselves “tutejšyja” (the locals) when asked about their own identity.

Before the World War II, Palessie was one of the centers of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Quite a few famous people of Jewish origin descend from here.

Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organisation and the first president of Israel was born in Motal village near Pinsk and received his first education here. Golda Meir, the fourth prime-minister and the “Iron Lady” of Israeli politics lived in Pinsk with her family for some time before they emigrated to the United States. The winner of 1971 Nobel Prize in Economics, Siamion Kuźniec (Simon Smith) also came from Pinsk, where he was born and studied at a local gymnasium. Another famous Pinsk scholar, David Shoenberg, became professor of Physics at Cambridge University.

Early ethnographers of the Russian Empire depicted Paliašuks as a gloomy and unhappy people with weak health and a widespread hair illness. Today, however, Paliessie demonstrates highest birth rates in Belarus and is famous for

its strong local communities. The main reason for such developments seems to be tied to a religion not common in other Belarusian regions – Protestantism.

The Miracle of Paliessie Protestantism

Protestant communities began to spread in Belarus in 1920-1930s, but soon the communists destroyed most of them during Stalin's rule. Until the 1970s, authorities constantly persecuted the protestant church. Nevertheless, the communities continued to exist and flourished after the collapse of the USSR.

The Brest region, the western part of Paliessie, presents the centre of protestant communities in Belarus. Protestants differ significantly in their way of life compared to regular Belarusians. Protestant families often have more than five children, while normally Belarusians have one or two. Protestants do not drink alcohol, while in some Belarusian villages alcoholism killed every single man.

No wonder the region looks rather positive in terms of its  social indicators. It has the youngest population in Belarus and higher average household income. For example, the whole Alšany village, one of the biggest protestant communities in Belarus, deals with the cucumber business.

Every family has greenhouses where they toil day and night. Remarkably, local children do not want to go to big cities in search of a better life. They stay in the village and continue their father's business. "Why should we go to the city? Here, on the land, we can make more money during one season than you will make during your whole life", they say.

Paliessie as a Tourist Destination

Due to its unique nature, culture and history, Paliessie became popular among Belarusian as well as foreign tourists. Some people seek the ancient way of life which still exists in

local villages. For instance, in some places the roofs of the houses are still covered with reed.

For some categories of tourists, the tour in areas contaminated by Chernobyl presents a real adventure.

Others enjoy struggling through vast swamps and woods. Actually, Paliessie's wetlands appear the largest complex of wetlands in Europe that have preserved their natural environment.

Paliessie has a great potential for tourism as it offers experiences and adventures for those who like unusual experiences, hidden just a few kilometres from the EU border.